DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 858 JC 020 593

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TITLE	Influences on the Educational Decisions of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Hispanic Serving Institutions.
PUB DATE	2002-04-00
NOTE	24p.; Presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges (Seattle, WA, April 19-20, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Choice; College Faculty; College Transfer Students; Community Colleges; Enrollment Influences; Ethnic Groups; *Family Relationship; *Hispanic American Students; Hispanic Americans; Minority Groups; *Peer Influence; Transfer Rates (College); *Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

The number of Hispanic undergraduates enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide increased by 98% during the decade 1985 to 1995. Nevertheless, Hispanic student participation continues to lag behind that of the Caucasian and African-American population. Among high school graduates between 18 and 24, 32% of the Hispanic population was enrolled in college, compared with 39% of African Americans and 45% of Caucasians. The majority of Hispanic enrollment in higher education is at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI). HSI community colleges are defined as institutions that are accredited and degree-granting colleges, with 25% or greater total Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment. The purpose of this study was to identify those individuals who influenced the educational decisions of Hispanic community college students enrolled at HSIs. The authors conducted interviews at three HSIs representing varying levels of the HSI designation (from 25% to 91% Hispanic enrollment). Thirty individuals were interviewed at each institution. Sixty percent of interviewees mentioned the influence of family members. Faculty members were mentioned most often after family members (48%), followed by peers (23%). The report makes recommendations for addressing the implications of the findings, including increased communication between faculty and students. Contains 35 references. (NB)

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Running head: EDUCATIONAL DECISIONS OF HISPANIC STUDENTS

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Influences on the Educational Decisions of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Hispanic Serving Institutions

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges
Seattle, WA, April 19-20, 2002

JC020593

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Abstract

This study attempts to identify factors that influence Hispanic students' decision to attend and persist in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI's). Using a multiple case study design, three Hispanic-serving institutions were identified and thirty students at each institution were interviewed. QSR NUD*IST software was used to analyze the interview content and identify themes in students' responses. Family influences, community college faculty, and students' peers were identified as the primary influence on educational decisions.

Influences on the Educational Decisions of Hispanic Students Enrolled in Hispanic Serving Institutions

Introduction

The number of Hispanic undergraduates enrolled in colleges and universities nationwide increased by 98% during the decade 1985 to 1995 (Nettles & Perna, 1997). Despite this increased enrollment, Hispanic student participation continues to lag behind that of the Caucasian and African American population. Among high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24, 32% of the Hispanic population was enrolled in college compared to 39% of African Americans and 45% of Caucasians (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

The majority of Hispanic enrollment in higher education is at Hispanic-serving colleges and universities, and the bulk of the recent Hispanic enrollment increase is in community colleges that are Hispanic-serving institutions (Avalos & Pavel, 1993; American Association of Community Colleges, 2001). While the community college has provided expanded access for Hispanic students, they have the lowest retention rates and the highest transfer losses. Nora and Rendon (1990) indicated that 80 percent of Hispanic community college students express the intent to transfer to a 4-year institution, yet their national transfer rates remain below 20%.

A 1999 report from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board emphasizes the importance of understanding the educational decisions of the Hispanic population. Currently, college participation rates in Texas trail the nation as a whole. In Texas, 32% of 19-year-olds are enrolled in higher education, compared to a national average of 40%. Equally important is the fact that among the 10 most populous states, Texas is ranked 8th in college participation. Texas

also trails the nation in the representation of associate's degrees awarded. The number of associate's degrees awarded annually in Texas represents only 6% of our two-year colleges' enrollments, compared to a 10% national average. One reason for this disparity is the significant difference in participation rates of ethnic groups. In 1998 approximately 7.8% of the state's Caucasian 15-to-34 year old population was enrolled in public institutions, compared to 3.7% of the Hispanic and 4.5% of the Black 15-to-34 year old population. Based on current participation rates, an additional 160,000 students will be enrolled in Texas public higher education by 2015. If minority participation rates were the same as for Caucasian students, the resulting increase would be 425,000 additional students.

The purpose of this study is to identify those individuals that influence the educational decisions of Hispanic community college students enrolled at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). We define educational decisions as:

1. the decision to enroll in the community college;
2. the decision to continue at the community college (should the individual consider dropping out);
3. the decision to earn a certificate or an associate's degree;
4. the decision to transfer to a baccalaureate institution;
5. the choice of major or field of study.

Literature on the influence of individuals on the educational decisions as defined in this study is limited. While there is a substantial amount of literature on who influences college choice, only the influences of faculty have been examined from a more comprehensive nature. Two studies have identified faculty as having a positive role in the recruitment of specific

student populations. Tack (1986) identified faculty as a key component of strategies for recruiting 'superior' students into teacher education programs. Buckley and Feldbaum (1979) found that faculty had a direct bearing on the recruitment of African-American students in associate, diploma, and baccalaureate nursing programs.

The influence of faculty has been cited as the most important factor in retaining students at all types of institutions, including the community college (Roueche, 1993). Most often, terms such as accessible, caring, supportive, and understanding appear in descriptions of "how" faculty have influenced retention (Penn, 1999). In addition, strategies to increase faculty-student interaction are often cited in plans to improve retention (Sydow & Sandel, 1998). The lack of interaction with faculty has been shown as a negative influence on retention (Rendon, 1995). Most importantly, one study identified the lack of interaction with Hispanic faculty as the primary cofactor of Hispanic student attrition (Jaramillo, 1992).

The literature review revealed no examinations of the influence of faculty on the completion of the associate's degree. One study (Elliott, 1989) did, however, indicate that faculty influenced persistence to the point that community college students transferred to four-year institutions. Another study found that faculty played an important part in transfer, especially at institutions with a high transfer rate (Knight, 1996). Moreover, a third study (Laden, 1992) found that faculty played a vital role in successfully preparing Hispanic students to transfer to four-year institutions.

To date, very little of the literature on the educational decisions of Hispanic students has focused on the influences of individuals. This research consists of the use of social capital concepts from economics on the decisions of minority students to attend postsecondary

institutions (Perna, 2000; Sanchez, 2000). A number of studies have reported barriers to the successful transfer from the community college to four-year institutions (Davies & Casey, 1998; Laden, 1999; Myhre, 1998) and Zamani (2000) emphasized factors that increase the risk of attrition for Hispanic students. There is also a body of research that has identified institutional aspects or examined programs that facilitate student success (Harbin, 1997; Kangas, 1993; Kangas & Ma, 1992a, 1992b; Kraemer, 1995; Laden, 1999; Stromei, 2000). A close review of these studies, however, does reveal some indication of those that have the potential to influence the educational decisions of Hispanic students. The educational level of parents of Hispanic college students has been displayed as both a barrier (low educational level) and as related to success (high educational level) (Attinasi, 1989; Zamani, 2000). We can then assume that parents may influence the educational decisions of Hispanic students. Laden (1999) uses the term, "disencouragement" to represent the negative influence on Hispanic students often evidenced from family members. Thus, family influence may indeed include a more extended family. Connecting minority students with each other through mentoring activities has been found to be a strong retention tool (Stromei, 2000). This finding indicates the potential of peers to influence the educational decisions of Hispanic students.

Based on our review of the literature, we anticipated that those who influence the educational decisions of Hispanic students were community college faculty, family members, and peers. From the literature on college choice we added to this list high school faculty members and community college others (such as recruiters and other staff positions).

Methodology

We used a multiple case study design to conduct this research study. Three community college HSIs were selected as cases for this project. To earn designation as an HSI, the community college must be an accredited and degree granting institution with 25% or greater total Hispanic undergraduate full-time equivalent enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In 1998, the Department of Education recognized 203 HSIs in 12 locations: eleven states and Puerto Rico. Slightly more than two-thirds (67%) of all HSIs are in three locations: California (57 HSIs), Puerto Rico (47 HSIs), and Texas (32 HSIs). Slightly more than half (52.7%) of all HSIs are 2-year institutions, and 46.3% of all HSIs are public, 2-year institutions.

We conducted interviews at three HSIs representing varying levels of the HIS designation. These institutions ranged from 25% to 91% of their FTE enrollment being self-identified as Hispanic. This method of selecting cases provides the opportunity to determine whether common themes, patterns, and outcomes occur across this variation of Hispanic enrollment (Creswell, 1994; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

To gather information for the study we conducted interviews. A total of ninety individuals were interviewed, thirty at each respective institution. To conduct the interviews we used the general interview guide approach (Patton, 1980). In this approach a list of questions or issues are outlined so that basically the same information is gathered from each respondent. The interviewer is free to develop questions spontaneously and to establish a conversational style, as long as the focus remains on the predetermined subject areas. With the general interview guide approach we were not limited completely to the guide, thus allowing us to move beyond mere reporting to probe responses regarding the individuals who influenced each student's educational

decisions. Interviews were scheduled at each respective site, in consecutive days, at times convenient to the participants. For data collection, we utilized voice recordings, which are considered the least distracting and most comprehensive method of collecting interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After securing participant permission, we tape recorded all interviews, with notes taken during the interview serving as backup. An independent party transcribed recordings and field notes as soon as possible after each interview.

To protect the anonymity of the students, each institution assisted us in identifying individuals who were willing to be interviewed and in obtaining their written permission. We identified participants only by a code representing the college and an interview number. Demographics concerning the representation of the sample are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Data of Sample

Characteristic	Institution			
	#1	#2	#3	Total
Age				
22 or younger	18	11	12	41
22-27	7	6	8	21
28 or older	5	13	10	28
Gender				
Male	15	15	15	45
Female	15	15	15	45
Marital Status				
Single	20	16	16	52
Married	10	14	14	38
Parents' Educational Level*				
Neither	21	28	23	72
Both	2	0	1	3
Father	3	2	5	10
Mother	4	0	1	5
Credit Hours Completed				
12 or fewer	9	5	4	18
12-23	5	10	12	27
24-47	6	8	10	24
48-60	10	4	1	15
60+	0	3	3	6

*Educational level was defined as completion of an associate's degree or higher

QSR NUD*IST software (QSR, 1997) was used to aid in data analysis. This software assists in segmenting the interview content into text units representing discrete incidents, ideas, or events. Each text unit was coded as a node representing a main category or as a subcategory of the node. The nodes are then placed in a hierarchical order, creating an index tree. Common patterns or themes were identified from the index trees in the final step of data analysis. Themes can both describe and explain phenomenon (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The findings are first discussed in terms of the two themes that emerged from this step of the analysis. Findings with respect to each institution are then presented.

Findings

Theme One: Family Influences

The hierarchical order of index trees begins with influences from the individual's family members (Figure 1). This theme was mentioned in three-fifths (60%) of the interviews. Three distinct descriptions of family influences emerged. The most dominant influence on the educational decisions of the Hispanic students who are parents is their children. This influence was present at all three institutions in the study.

> Participant #1-24
> I tried to talk to my 7th grader about the importance of getting good grades and going to college. He didn't want to listen because I dropped out of high school. Eventually I got my GED, but the day he asked me, "what did I know about college" was the day I decided to take some classes.

> Participant #2-08
> Each day I ask my children to see their papers from school and we talk about their grades. My first college class was in the evening. When I got home about 10, I found that my third grader was not asleep. She wanted to look at my papers from school to see how I did. How can I not do the work? How could I even think of dropping out?

> Participant #3-21
> My daughter is my primary motivation to earn a degree. If it was just me it wouldn't be so important, but I want to provide a better life for her.

Two other types of family aspects influenced the educational decisions of the Hispanic students in this study. The first family influence consisted of support and encouragement. This influence was also present at all institutions. One example of this influence comes from a "history" with the institution, the other is in the more traditional form of monetary support.

> Participant #1-09
> I'm the sixth person from my extended family to attend institution #1. Even though my home is not that close, but this is where all of our family begins higher education. Some families go to UT, our family comes to institution #1.

> Participant #2-16

My folks are very supportive. They are always asking how things are going. They help me out with money, they even bought me a second hand car.

A second influence from family resulted in the strong desire to "not repeat" or to "not be like" family members. This influence was most prevalent at institution #3, less so at institution #2, and was not mentioned at institution #1.

Participant #3-14
My parents have never had anything but dead end, low paying jobs. I don't want my life to be that way.

Participant #2-18
My older sister got pregnant in high school—that ended her education.

Participant #3-27
None of my cousins went to college. They all ended up in jail—I don't want that kind of life.

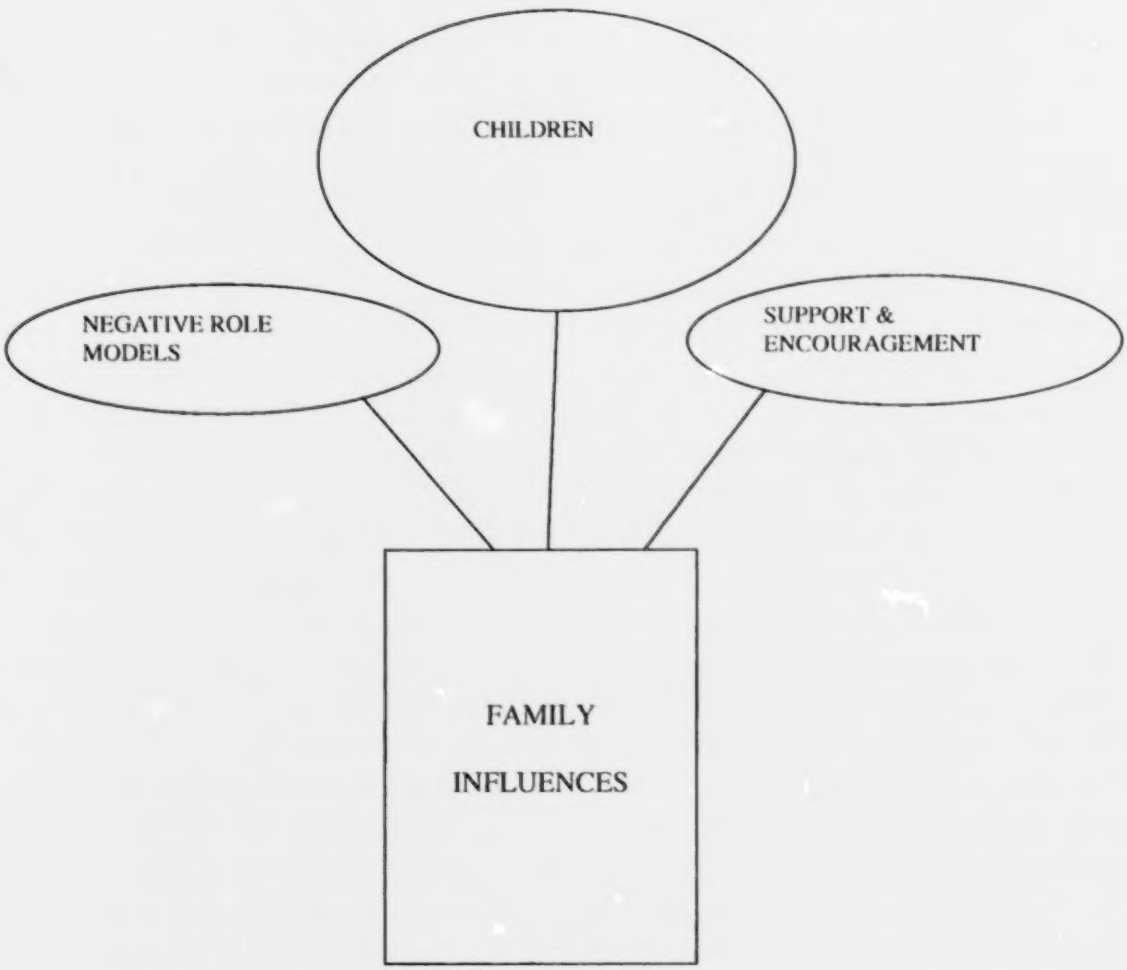

FIGURE 1: INDEX TREE OF FAMILY INFLUENCES

Theme Two: Other Influences

The second index tree identifies the influence of individuals other than family on the educational decisions of Hispanic students in this study (Figure 2). Community college faculty were the most often reported "other" (48%), followed by peers (23%). The most common word used in

descriptions of faculty influence was "encouragement". The most common words used in descriptions of peer influence was "showed me" or "told me about". The influence of community college faculty and peers was found at each respective institution.

> Participant #2-02
> My professor encouraged me to think about continuing on. My first goal was to earn the certificate so I could get a better job. She showed me that with the associate's degree I could get do more with employment so I continued on. Now she is suggesting I think about a bachelor's degree and I'm thinking about transferring.

> Participant #3-16
> My friends told me about (name omitted). He started here, now he has a graduate degree and owns his business.

High school teachers were reported as an influencing other by only 12 percent of the interviewees, virtually all indicating that the influence was on the decision to enroll in college. The influence of community college others was reported by 9 percent of the interviewees. Most often this interaction occurred because of the student working on campus and having interactions with administrators and staff members.

> Participant #3-04
> My high school teacher convinced me to give college a try. I was worried, because I didn't do well in most subjects. He encouraged me to start at institution #3 because I could get extra help in the subjects where I need it.

> Participant #2-16
> I work in the campus mail room and deliver mail to virtually all the offices. Watching what goes on, what administrators do and developing relationships with some of the workers—they are the ones I talk to when I have questions about higher education.

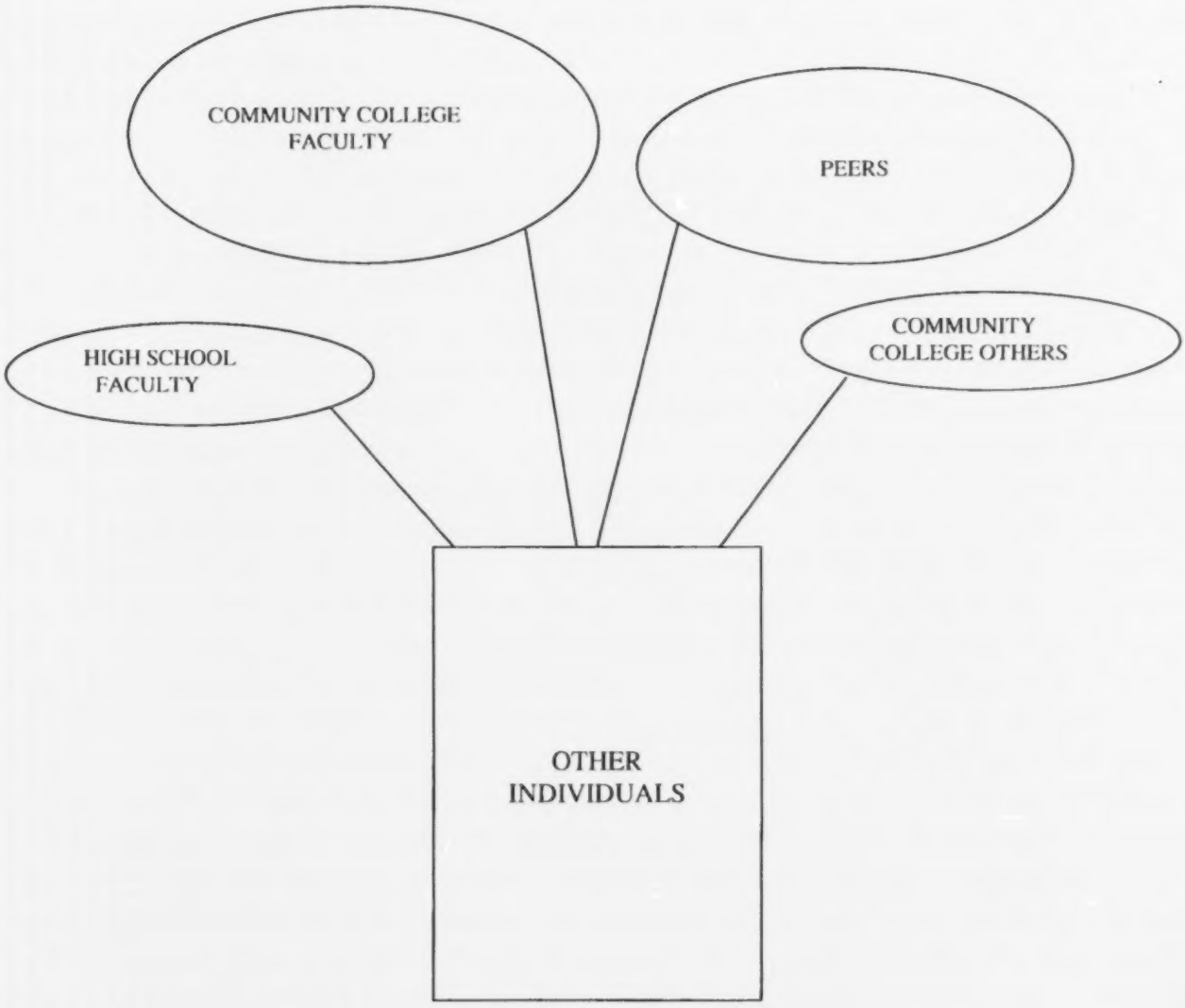

FIGURE 2: INDEX TREE OF INFLUENTIAL INDIVIDUALS

Institutional Findings

A closer examination of these themes revealed different influences on educational decisions at each of the respective institutions. Family members, Community college faculty, and peers were the most influential persons for Hispanic students at each of the three institutions

respectively. First, the influence of the presence of Hispanic faculty or administrators as role models was mentioned by the interviewees at only one of the three institutions studied. We point to this finding because it is in disagreement with other research that stresses the importance of interactions with Hispanic faculty (Jaramillo, 1992). Second, only 15 (17%) of those interviewed had any type of interaction with the community college faculty prior to enrollment. The vast majority (86%), however, reported that these interactions influenced their decision to enroll at that community college.

Implications for Practice

The methodology of any study has limitations. This study was an initial attempt to examine individuals that influence the educational decisions of Hispanic students. Even as an initial attempt, there are implications for practice relevant to the institutions included in the study. The implications parallel the themes that emerged from the analysis of the student interviews.

Family members have been shown to be both a barrier to and a support for Hispanic students attending college. There are many examples of institutional and community projects aimed at getting minority youth involved in higher education. At each of the institutions in our study, the children of Hispanic students served as a primary influence on their educational decisions. This finding suggests that activities geared to introduce Hispanic elementary and secondary students to higher education may also be used to recruit their parents and vice versa. Moreover, involving children as much as possible in the "college life" of their parents could prove to be a very effective strategy to encourage the retention, associate degree completion, and transfer of the parents.

Hispanic students may indeed be a "legacy" market for community colleges. Most often used as a recruitment strategy for private institutions, community colleges may be wise to incorporate such practices into their strategies. The strong desire to "not repeat" less than desirable aspects of family members' lives presents an interesting challenge. Not all individuals (Hispanic or otherwise) have had such experiences. Thus, the challenge of identifying the appropriate avenues and developing non-stereotypical means to incorporate this finding into practice is daunting.

It is doubtful that the community college faculty members are aware of the extent of their influence on educational decisions. Student comments point to the age-old adage "little things mean a lot". A few encouraging words here and there, speaking with students outside of class and showing interest in the student are all practices in which faculty can participate that will make a significant impact upon an institution's recruitment and retention. What may seem like small actions to the faculty member are much greater actions to Hispanic students, and those actions influence their educational decisions. Where faculty were the most influential, we were taken with the extent that students referred to the faculty in a "possessive" nature. In numerous interviews we heard the words "my professor" rather than "the instructor". It was also obvious that a primary aspect of the influence of faculty members was their knowledge concerning earnings and career progression as a result of educational attainment. A significant number of students indicated that they entered the institution with the intention of completing enough coursework to gain employment in a particular field. Most often, a certificate was mentioned as the initial educational goal. Providing information about expanded career and earning

opportunities by completing the associate's or bachelor's degree was the primary way in which faculty influenced continued involvement in higher education.

There are a number of implications for practice at all three of the institutions studied. The first is to focus both human and financial resources on activities and strategies that increase the interactions of faculty and students. Second, educational training as a means to secure employment is one of the primary reasons that Hispanic students enroll, but the educational goal is less than the associate's degree. Recruitment materials and strategies that focus on this finding may prove beneficial to increasing enrollment.

It is possible that many community colleges do not realize the extent of peer influence on educational decisions. We found that, in many instances, peers are the primary influence on educational decisions ranging from choice of major to whether and where to transfer. The implication for practice, therefore, is to focus both human and financial resources on peer activities. The use of peer mentoring and tutoring may prove to be beneficial in efforts to increase retention and associate's degree completion. Using current students in the recruitment of potential students is another possible way to use this finding to improve recruitment and retention.

A final implication for practice stems from the finding that faculty may be effective in influencing the educational decision to attend college. Few of those we interviewed had any interaction with faculty prior to enrolling. The vast majority of the students who did interact with faculty prior to enrollment indicated that the community college faculty influenced their decision to enroll at that particular institution. Pilot projects should be developed to introduce

community college faculty to prospective Hispanic students, and these projects should include information gathering about the influence on enrollment decisions.

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